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# Helms feels LBJ knew of mail plan

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Washington—Richard M. Helms, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, said yesterday that he thinks he told President Lyndon B. Johnson about the CIA's illegal mail-opening program but has no written record of having done so.

Mr. Helms also told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities that he had no recollection of having told President Richard M. Nixon about the program, although he did explain it to John N. Mitchell, Mr. Nixon's first attorney general.

His statement about President Johnson was the first suggestion of presidential knowledge of the 20-year program to open and photograph letters sent to and from Communist countries.

The Rockefeller commission, which investigated CIA domestic activities on behalf of President Ford earlier this year, said it could find no evidence that any president had been told about the mail-opening program.

Mr. Helms was asked a series of questions about whether various postmasters general, attorneys general or presidents ever knew the CIA was opening first-class mail in violation of specific statutes prohibiting such openings.

He said that, in trying to refresh his memory, he often thought he had mentioned it to President Johnson, probably in 1967, but he had no specific record of having done so.

"It's just a belief I had," he said.

Asked whether he knew the program was illegal, Mr. Helms said at first that he was not a lawyer and that he had spent his many years in the CIA just trying to do a job the agency had been given in the cold war atmosphere of the 1940's and 1950's—namely, to protect

the U.S. against foreign intelligence operations.

Under further questioning, he admitted that subordinates had told him the program was illegal.

Asked why he had not raised this specific point with the presidents he worked for, Mr. Helms said he knew the program had begun when the late Allen Dulles was CIA director, and he assumed that, since Dulles was a lawyer himself, he had made his "legal peace" with the program.

Earlier, two former postmasters general said they did not consider the mail-opening program necessarily illegal.

J. Edward Day, a postmaster general in the Kennedy ad-

ministration, said: "My feeling then and now is that the CIA had overall powers. The CIA is and always has been something very different."

Winton M. Blount, a postmaster general under President Nixon, said he assumed the program—whatever it was in detail—was legal, because Mr. Helms had told him that Attorney General Mitchell approved of it.

But John A. Gronouski, postmaster general from 1963 to 1965, said he never knew about the program and would have opposed it if he had.

An internal CIA memorandum made public by the committee warned against telling Mr. Gronouski about the program for fear he would put a stop to it.